COURAGE TO BE

Baccalaureate Sermon
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Presbyterian College
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There is something wonderfully timeless about all of this: a warm and beautiful graduation weekend on the campus of an attractive liberal arts college. I've attended a fair number of them, as participant and parent, and if I stretch memory back several decades, I recall sitting there, where you are sitting this morning, in a kind of suspended animation, savoring a mixture of feelings including relief that I had actually made it, a little nostalgia about leaving (not much at the moment; that came and will come later!) – and a bit of boredom; the addresses and sermons on the occasion always seem to be about the same All over the country during these few weeks, very serious and scholarly and eloquent men and women will take an average of 25 minutes to tell graduating seniors:

Point 1 – The world is a mess.

Point 2 – You now have the ability and are old enough to make it less messy.

Point 3 – Go out and do it.

I recall one memorable graduation in the Ohio State stadium which holds 90,000+ and was one-half full. It was very hot. The speaker was a Nobel Prize winning chemist. His speech was about some esoteric formula in organic chemistry he was working on. I hadn't the slightest notion of what he was saying, nor what relationship it had to the occasion. Nor did anyone else, for that matter. The M.B.A.s were reading *The Wall Street Journal*, en masse, the Law School was shooting the Business School with water pistols, the Medical School was conducting a champagne brunch, the veterinary students, I recall, were inflating rubber surgical gloves with helium and launching them into the warm spring air. The sound system went out, or perhaps God, in infinite mercy and good humor, intervened. In any case, suddenly we could no longer hear about organic chemistry. It made no difference – on he went for thirty more minutes.

And so one does wonder about the sermonizing and speechmaking to which we subject one another on this occasion. The people who really listen carefully, of course, are parents. Parents have a very great deal invested in the occasion, of their hope and love and cash. They are filled with pride. Some of them are a little giddy. "Tomorrow," they think, "we are going to be rich!" They will reach for their hankies a lot. You are one of the most important things they ever did. Garrison Keillor told a graduating class that the one constant in this life, the one thing you can

count on forever, is your parents worrying about you. He was right. We always did. We always will. We're worried right now about whether under those robes you're properly dressed, tucked in and have a clean handkerchief in your pocket. We're hoping you have socks on, or that you still own socks.

The supporting cast, the faculty and administration, are also proud and relieved. They like this weekend a lot. They hope you have paid all your bills. They will follow you and be watching with attentiveness as your future unfolds. They'll be pleased if you remember their names.

And you, in addition to relief, nostalgia and eagerness to get this over with, I suspect you're a little uneasy about the future, about what to do next, about whether you will live up to others' expectations, about making the right decisions.

And there is a story almost 3,000 years old, that is "tailor made" for the situation.

Back almost on the edge of recorded history, a loose federation of nomadic people are wondering what in the world they were doing there, and what in the world to do next. In fact, that vignette, it seems to me, is an almost perfect metaphor for a graduating class on a warm May Saturday in the year of our Lord, 1997.

For those people, too, it was a time of high anxiety, fear, excitement, potential and not a little dread. The children of Israel are standing on a hill, and see, for the very first time, the Promised Land. They had escaped from Egyptian slavery a full generation before. For 40 years they had been living as nomads in the vast desert of Sinai, wandering from oasis to oasis; Moses, their liberator and leader, always pushing, prodding, pulling, scolding, teaching – like a parent or professor or advisor. But now Moses is old. He's not going across the river with them. His time has come. And so he does a lot of summing up and gives them a lot of advice. You know, the kind of common sense things your parents always tell you: wear a hat, eat vegetables, get enough sleep. Moses tells them, "Do the right thing, obey the law, hold on to one another." And the climax of what he says is this.

> *"I call heaven and earth to witness. I have set before you life and death. Choose life so you and your descendants may live."*

There's a remarkable idea in that little sentence. They, the people, had responsibility for their future – who they would become. It was a choice they had to make. It would require will and courage. The matter was in their hands. The choice to live – to be – is theirs.

The remarkable thing about that sentiment is that people have always been told that what is to become of them, what they are to be, will be determined by the state, economy, caste or class system, or your DNA and genetic structure. Religion has weighed in by suggesting that your future is in the hands of the fates – of God. But here is Moses, with the radical suggestion that you and I have a lot to do with it. And that God intends for us to have that responsibility.
In that vignette from our Hebrew scripture, the matter is placed in the hands of the people. Choose – choose life. It is an idea that has intrigued the philosophers and theologians and artists.

The late Paul Tillich, in one of the most important books written in my generation, from which I have shamelessly lifted the title for this sermon, said:

> "Courage as the universal and essential self-affirmation of one's being is an ontological concept. The courage to be is the ethical act in which humans affirm their own being in spite of those elements of their existence which conflict with their essential self-affirmation."[i]

> William Shakespeare said that a little more poetically and clearly:

> Hamlet laments, "O God! God! How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world."

And then, in lines that put the matter powerfully and clearly:

> "To be, or not to be: that is the question."

The late Rollo May, psychiatrist, philosopher, has written a lot about it.

> "Courage," he said, "is not one virtue out of many: it is the foundation of all virtue. Courage is necessary to make being possible. Acorns become oak trees and kittens become cats automatically. But a man or woman becomes fully human only by his or her choices. People attain worth and dignity only by the multitudes of decisions they make from day to day. Those decisions require courage."[ii]

The truth is – and if you haven't discovered it yet, you will – the truth is that life sometimes knocks that courage out of us. Paul Tillich said "there are elements of existence which conflict with our essential self-affirmation." What was he talking about? Well, fear, for instance. Fear of the future. Fear of failing. Fear of criticism. Fear of death. Fear of falling down. Someone quipped that if Michaelangelo had been afraid of falling, he would have painted the Sistine Floor. Fear, in Moses' case, of the people already living in the land. Fear causes us to give up, give in, lower our sights, expectations, hopes, aspirations and choose non-being instead of being. Fear would have caused those people to turn around and return to slavery in Egypt – where there was food and job security, or perhaps – to remain right there, on the verge, peering into the future but afraid to proceed.

Isn't that what happens every time you and I decline to try something adventuresome and demanding and exciting because we're afraid we might fail, or that we'll be inconvenienced, or that we don't know how it will turn out? Isn't that what happens when you and I look out at the world and see a multitude of horrendous problems and shudder, or wring our hands and then turn our backs? We see, for instance, a political and educational system that can't seem to figure out how to pay for quality education for all our children; a healthcare system that cannot seem to get services to all the sick people, or even immunize all the babies; an urban environment characterized by a crisis in the simple existence of civil society, enclaves of second and third

generation unemployed men and adolescent mothers selling drugs to and shooting at one another. Isn't it a denial of our being as humans, to walk away from all that and retreat to privileged enclaves of affluence?

Sometimes we back away from the courage to be – because what's going on out there is so big, so pervasive, that we simply retreat. "Compassion fatigue" William Rasberry called it in a column he wrote on homelessness. The problems of the urban underclass, the man or woman who sleeps on the steam grates or huddled in a doorway, who is chemically addicted, physically and emotionally sick, unemployed and unemployable – the problems are so huge, people simply are worn out from caring, Rasberry said, and choose to step gingerly around them – or avert our eyes so as not even to see them.

In his recent book, Peter Gomes, preacher to the University at Harvard, says that when students talk about living the good life, the talk inevitably gets around to economic security and making lots of money. "I'm not greedy," a Harvard undergrad told him, "I just want all I can get." Not unlike that wonderful New Yorker cartoon, two Pilgrims, leaning on the rail of The Mayflower – Plymouth: "My immediate goal is religious freedom: my Long Range Plan is real estate."

I'm always inspired by women and men, great and small, who simply refuse to give up, to relinquish part of their own being, because a problem, a social structure, is so powerful: Rosa parks – who reached down into her soul and affirmed her being by refusing to sit in back: Jackie Robinson who changed not only professional baseball, but the way African-Americans – particularly men – see themselves. I learned this week about Norman Borlaug. I'll bet you never heard of Norman Borlaug. I never did. But I learned recently that along with Henry Kissinger and Elie Wiesel, he is one of three living American winners of the Nobel peace Prize.

Here's what *Atlantic Monthly* said about him:

> "Though barely known in the country of his birth, elsewhere in the world Norman Borlaug is widely considered to be among the leading Americans of our age. Borlaug is an 82 year-old plant breeder who for most of the past five decades has lived in developing nations, teaching the techniques of high-yield agriculture." "Borlaug's Africa project is a private-sector effort run by an obscure Nobel Peace Prize winner and a former American President whose altruistic impulses are made sport of in the American press. Its goal is something the West seems almost to have given up on – the rescue of Africa from human suffering. Recently Western governments have been easing out of African aid, pleading 'donor fatigue,' the difficulty of overcoming corruption, and fear of criticism from the environmental lobby.
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> "If overpopulation anarchy comes, it is likely to arrive first in Africa. Borlaug understands this, and is using his remaining years to work against that cataclysm. The odds against him seem long. But then, Norman Borlaug has already saved more lives than any other person who ever lived."[iii]

I call Heaven and Earth to witness. I have set before you death and life. Choose life.

The courage to be, the will to choose life can be knocked out of us …in the very middle of life by sudden and unexpected unemployment, for instance, which often leads to self-doubt, then self-dislike, self-hatred and eventually depression. Or the basic courage to be can be knocked out of us by fear – fear not so much of death, but of life. What if I fail? What if I stumble? What if I don't get a job? What if he leaves me? Or it can be an addiction, a dependency which leaves you powerless. Or the courage to be – can be slowly drained from us by spiritual apathy, which, in the frantic busy-ness to work hard and get ahead and make more money, so we can buy more stuff – the deadly "fast-track" to which every one of us is subject – simply squeezes out of our consciousness any awareness of grace and forgets, because it has no time, no energy left,

that all is grace
that life is a miracle
that every new day is God's gift
that every person given to us to love and
respect and revere is God's special gift …
that every hour – every moment of this
miracle of your life is God's personal gift
to you and along with it comes the
responsibility to choose to live it –
gratefully, fully, passionately.

Dr. Bernie Siegel, a surgeon and professor at Yale Medical School, author of several best-sellers, works mostly with people who are very sick. Hearing the three words, "You have cancer," often destroys the will to live, the courage to e. So Siegel works hard to nurture that fundamental will with each of his patients, no matter how little or much time they have left.

One of them, an 85 year-old woman, gave him a poem she wrote:

"If I had my life to live over …
I would take more chances,
I would take more trips,
I would scale more mountains …
Swim more rivers,
Watch more sunsets,
Eat more ice cream and fewer beans.
I would have more actual troubles
And fewer imaginary ones. You see …
I was one of those people who lived
Prophylactically and sensibly and sanely,
Hour after hour and day after day …
I've been one of those people who never went
Anywhere without

A thermometer, a hot water bottle, a gargle, a
Raincoat and a parachute ...
If I had it to do all over again,
I'd travel lighter, much lighter ...
I would start barefoot earlier
In the spring, and I'd stay that way
Later in the fall. And I would
Ride more merry-go-rounds, and
Catch more gold rings, and greet
More people, and pick more flowers,
And dance more often.
If I had it
To do all over again.
But you see,
I don't."[iv]

"Choose this day," Moses said.

Three times he says it ... "today ... this
day ... today."

That is, the choice to be responsible for life is made, not once and for all, but every day. And, may I suggest, it is almost never as clear and simple as that ancient picture of Moses admonishing the children of Israel to choose life. Rather the choice, the occasion for courage, comes wrapped up in other choices: to love or not to love: to get involved or to hold back: to serve and help or withdraw: to give your life to something important or to retreat and settle for a good credit rating and secure retirement: to commit self passionately to some improbable and wonderful dream like the peace of the world, the reconciliation of all God's people, the healing and feeding and housing of all God's children – or the staying at arm's length, being a spectator instead of a participant.

In Washington, D.C., with a few free hours recently, we visited the U.S. Holocaust Museum; an unrelenting three hours of pictures, exhibits, films, showing common good folk, implicated by little choices, by averting their eyes, by refusing to care, and then, The Hall of Remembrance, a large room, quiet, with candles, a pool, and inscribed on the wall –

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live..."

More than 3,000 years ago, peering into an unknown future which also happened to be the Promised Land, Moses cast the issue in terms of a decision, a choice. "Choose life," he said.

So – in the midst of all the advice, the good wishes for success and happiness, may I have the privilege of this challenge?

Don't be afraid. Have the courage to care passionately. Find something you care about enough to weep, and work; something to live for; something you love enough to die for.

The gift of life is given to us without condition. It is yours to live, to enjoy, to give. How you do that is a matter of courage.

The choice is yours this day … every day …
The courage to be.
God bless you on your way.

[i] Tillich, Paul, *The Courage To Be,* Yale University Press, New Haven, 1952, p.3.

[ii] May, Rollo, *The Courage To Create,* Bantam Books, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1975, p.5.

[iii] Easterbrook, Gregg, *Atlantic,* January 1997 as quoted in *Context,* Christian Publications, Chicago, Illinois, May 1, 1997, Vol. 29, p.1.

[iv] Siegel, Bernie, S., M.D., *Peace, Love And Healing,* Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, 1989, p. 245